Eblaite language

Eblaite /ˈɛblə.aɪt/ (also known as Eblan ISO 639-3), or **Paleo Syrian**, is an extinct Semitic language which was used during the third millennium BCE by the populations of Northern Syria.[3] It was named after the ancient city of Ebla, in modern western Syria.[3] Variants of the language were also spoken in Mari and Nagar.[3][4] According to Cyrus H. Gordon,[5] although scribes might have spoken it sometimes, Eblaite was probably not spoken much, being rather a written lingua franca with East and West Semitic features.

The language was discovered through cuneiform tablets found in Ebla. Along with Akkadian, it is the oldest known Semitic language.

Contents

Eblaite	
Eblaite inscriptions found in Ebla	
Region	Ebla
Era	3rd millennium BCE[1]
Language family	Afro-Asiatic ■ Semitic ■ **Eblaite**
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	xeb
Linguist List	xeb (http://multitree.org/codes/xeb)
Glottolog	ebla1238 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/ebla1238)[2]

Discovery

The 1964 discovery at the Tell Mardikh site in Northern Syria of an ancient city from the second half of the third millenium BCE completely altered archeological knowledge of the time, as it indicated the existence of a contemporary urban culture during the Early Dynastic Period of Mesopotamia, within a geographic zone where, at the time, previous excavations had revealed nothing on the same scale.

In agreement with Ignace Gelb's theories on the subject of all inhabited centers in Syria of the same era, it appeared that the Tell Mardikh civilization's cultural identity did not necessarily fall within the Semitic family.[6] However, in 1968, the discovery at the same site of a statue bearing an ancient Akkadian inscription, mentioning the king Ibbit-Lim of Ebla, soon contradicted this hypothesis.[7] It therefore became possible not only to identify this city as the ancient city of Ebla, referred to in numerous Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources, but additionally, considering the strong linguistic connotations of the king's name,[8] to

Ebla and other principal sites of Syria and Upper Mesopotamia in the second half of the third millenium BCE.

specify the identity as Amorite. It became necessary, however, to revise these conclusions again, after the 1974 discovery in the ancient ruins of a Bronze Age palace (2400-2225 BCE) of 42 cuneiform tablets, then of 17,000 others the following year, revealing a language which had nothing in common with Amorite, which used archaic morphological characters present in Akkadian, with incontestable lexical similarities to West Semitic Languages such as Hebrew or Aramaic. Excavations were directed by Professor Paolo Matthiae and the inscriptions translated by Giovanni Pettinato.

This opposition between a West Semitic lexicon and an Akkadian morphology led to the increase of discussions and controversies surrounding the nature of this language. For P. Fronzaroli, this opposition would indicate an Akkadian dialect which had undergone a strong Western influence.[9] On the other hand, Giovanni Garbini favored nuancing this approach, drawing attention to the fragility of a comparison with Akkadian that is too narrow, pointing out that there is no other contemporary model with which to draw comparisons. In his "Considerations on the Language of Ebla," he highlighted the artificial character of this opposition between morphology and lexicon, considering that "Akkadian differs from Western Semitic as we knew it hitherto because the latter was documented only on the phase following Amorite innovation. If it is traced back to the time before these innovations, a northwestern pre-Amorite Semitic begins to emerge, which is concordant with Akkadian just because the latter preserved its earlier characters after Amorite invasion."[10] Essentially basing his study on the lexicon, G. Pettinato was nevertheless the first to announce in 1975 the discovery of a new Semitic language, to which he gave the same "Paleo-Canaanite."[11] Though the scientific community was in favor of accepting this idea, they were not unanimous regarding Pettinato's proposed name. In fact, while indicating advantageously its similarity to Hebrew, Ugaritic, or Phoenician, the name proved nevertheless incapable of indicating its morphological roots in East Semitic languages. G. Garbini then proposed the term "Paleo-Syrian,"[12] but again, this proved just as inadequate to convey the Mesopotamian particularities and was not accepted. Therefore, without a name to fit this new language's different linguistic characteristics, "Eblaite" was finally chosen.

The Nature of the Documents

Of the Eblaite corpus, whose publication began in 1974 as stated above, the majority of discovered documents are administrative or economic in nature, along with about a hundred historical tablets as well as some scholastic writings: lexicons, syllabaries, or bilingual texts. To this list, we must also add a few rare literary texts: fragments of myths, epics, hymns, proverbs, as well as some documents for conjuration.

From a linguistic perspective, although a great number of these documents were effectively written in Sumerian, a rather large portion of these only used the language ideogrammatically, as confirmed by certain Semitic elements added to the Sumerograms - such as morphological markers, suffix pronouns, or certain prepositions - which reveal a underlying language distinct from Sumerian.

in U_4 DINGIR *a-mu-su$_3$* NIDBA

"the day when the god of his father had his festival"

Such writing practices obviously made approaching Eblaite difficult. Fortunately, some rare documents, bilingual letters or tablets, mostly written syllabically, enabled the breaking down of this graphical barrier and the clarification of our knowledge of this language.

Of course if we add to this collection the onomastic material, which in Semitic languages typically consists of short sentences, the portion of the Eblaite corpus that is usable from a linguistic perspective remains relatively narrow and limited from a morphological, syntactical, or lexical point of view.

The Graphical Barrier and Writing Practices

The main difficulty faced by those studying the language of Ebla arose largely from issues in the writing system. Indeed, Eblaite shares its cuneiform writing system with the Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Hurrian, and Elamite languages, a graphical system where each symbol may have collectively or separately an ideogrammatic and/or phonetic value. In the first case, the symbol or chain of symbols simply signifies an idea that is understandable by way of its Sumerian meaning; in the second case, the symbol indicates, with a more-or-less large approximation based on writing practices, the form of an Eblaite term following a principle of syllabic decomposition.

The comparative study of Eblaite symbols reveals some differences with the systems used by other schools of scribes. On the other hand, the Eblaite syllabary, without being identical, bears significant similarities with that of the ancient Akkadian used in Kish during the Early Dynastic Period (DA II).

In fact, three transcription practices appear in the Ebla texts: one exclusively syllabic, another using both syllabism and ideography, and the last largely employing the ideographic principle. Included in the first category is mostly the incantatory texts and the writing of anthroponyms; in the second, the epistolary, historical, and literary documents, not to mention some diplomatic texts; and in the third, economic and administrative texts, relating to the management and stewardship of the palace where ideography is a sufficient system for the writing of *realia*. Qualitatively and quantitatively, this situation entirely resembles that of the Mesopotamian corpus.

The small portion of syllabic documents, compared to the large quantity of texts written using Sumerian logograms, had led G. Pettinato[13] to consider, at first, that these documents were written in Sumerian. Such a hypothesis obviously no longer holds today with regard to our understanding of the writing and formulation practices particular to Sumerian and Eblaite scribes. These graphical conventions are so specific that they are very often sufficient to identify the language underlying the ideograms.[14] Thus, for example, the Sumerian practice of writing filiation following the formula X DUMU Y ("X son of Y") stands out from the Akkadian and Eblaite practice which prefers the phrasing X DUMU.NITA Y.[15]

However, if, as we just saw, we can identify a signified of Semitic origin beneath a Sumerogram, it remains difficult to extract its signifier. Fortunately, the restoration of phonetic values to these symboles has been made possible by the existence of bilingual lexical lists, where each Sumerian ideogram has its Eblaite form specified in a glossary using syllabic writing.

Even when the phonetic value of the word is specified, a whole series of semantic problems remains, still obstructing our understanding. For example, when an Eblaite scribe uses the symbol LUGAL meaning "king" in Sumerian, he transcribes it with its Akkadian value *šarrum* but translates it as "dignitary." This simple example shows the gaps in interpretation that may result from reading Eblaite symbols while only considering their Sumerian values.

As for the strictly syllabic system of writing, it is not free of issues either. The rarity of V[owel] + C[onsonant] -type symbols require certain approximations in the transcription of words. Thus we find the term ʾ*ummum* "mother" syllabically rendered as u_3-*mu-mu*. Additionally, while Sumerian sometimes proceeds morphologically by reduplication of a word to make it plural, Eblaite reuses this practice with the same meaning, but transforming it into a simple graphical signified. In this way we find forms along the

lines of nasi$_{11}$-nasi$_{11}$ to write the plural of nas$_{11}$ "the people." Furthermore it is not uncommon that the writing presents a defective character, where all the morphological markers are not indicated: *ḫa-za-an* šu-ba-ti = **ḫazānum yimḫur* "the mayor takes it."[16]

To these issues we can also add those connected with the intrinsic limits of the Sumerian writing system, incapable of rendering a portion of Semitic languages' phonological system. As Diakonoff specifies, the Sumerian system is organized upon a tense~lax opposition and can only with great difficulty render the voiced~unvoiced opposition as well as the emphatics of Semitic languages. Thus we find the syllables /da/, /ṭa/, and /ta/ transcribed with the same symbol DA, as well as the syllables /gu/, /ku/, and /qu/ with the same symbol GU.

For the same reasons, it is equally impossible for the Sumerian writing system to render the laryngeals and pharyngeals of Eblaite. However, to overcome these difficulties, they used - just like ancient Akkadian - graphical conventions such as the use of the symbols E and MA to render the phonemes /ḥ/ ou /ʿ/, or else by playing on syllabic symbols which end in the vowel /e/, which is nothing but the vocalic trace of one of the two preceding articulations.

Additionally, as shown by the written forms *la-ḫa* for /laḫān/ or *ba-da-a* for /baytay/ for example, the phonemes /w/, /y/, /m/, and /n/ are not rendered graphically in the final or initial position. Taking these two examples again, notice that, for one, the quantity of the vowels is not rendered by the writing (the form *da-za-a* for /taṣṣa ʾā/ "they will go out" shows us that double consonants face the same fate) and secondly, that the vowel /a/ is used equally to represent the syllables /ʾa/, /ya/, and /ay/.

Phonological System

As shown above, the difficulties with reading Eblaite texts complicate approaching its phonological system.

Studying the usage context for the symbols I, I$_2$, A, ʾA, ḪA, etc. with regard to the writing conventions of Akkadian scribes enabled the determination, beyond some identification difficulties created by the graphical barrier, of "the existence and autonomy of the phonemes /h/, /ḥ/, and /ḫ/ confirmed by the realization of the vowel /a/ as [ɛ] in the closed syllables /ḥaC/ and /ʾaC/, as well as the tendency to extend this phenomenon to the vowel /a/ followed by a pharyngeal. We currently lack the elements to determine the existence of a phoneme /ġ/ or a variant [ġ]."[17]

Also through a contextual analysis of the symbols z + V[owel]: ze$_2$, s + V: se$_{11}$, š + V, Pelio Fronzaroli confirmed the existence of the phonemes /s/, /ṣ/, /ḍ/, and /ẓ/, as well as the phonemes /s/, /š/, and /ṯ/, a group to which it is perhaps also necessary to add /z/.[18]

As for the existence of diphthongs, this remains questionable. The diphthong /ay/ seems to be conserved in Eblaite as illustrated by the form /ʿayn-ʿayn/. However, the reality of this phoneme is heavily discussed by I. Gelb: "The main difference between Fronzaroli's treatment of the diphthong /aj/ at Ebla and mine is that Fronzaroli believes (...) that the original diphthong /aj/ was preserved in Eblaite (even though not written), while I take it to have developed to /ā/."[19]

Here we should also highlight the issue of the unstable realization of liquids with the alternation of /r/ and /l/. I. Gelb speculated two reasons for this phenomenon: "If the weakness of the r / l phoneme (which is amply exemplified at Ebla) should be considered as an indication of the Hurrian influence on Eblaic phonology, then we should note that this feature is characteristic not only of Hurrian (and other languages in the general area), but also of Egyptian, and may therefore be either a surviving feature of the Semito-Hamitic (or Afro-Asiatic) or a cross-linguistic areal feature."[20]

Pronominal System

Eblaite has two forms of personal pronouns: independent and suffix. Additionally, the texts have also revealed a determinative pronominal form as well as interrogative forms. The epigraphical material does not always allow a complete reconstruction of the paradigms, and the gaps must be filled on the basis of linguistic comparisons as well as internal reconstitutions that take the language's own structures into account.

Nominal System

Eblaite presents a nominal system that is comparable to that of Akkadian et whose traces are found in certain Semitic languages. In particular, there are three inflectional categories: gender, with masculine and feminine forms; number, with singular, dual, and plural; and finally case, covering both syntactical relationships like the nominative, accusative, and genitive cases, but also more concrete relationships like the dative and locative cases.[21] This organization of the nominal morphology was likely that of all Semitic languages until the first millenium BCE. Today, only Arabic retains the trace of it.

Verbal System

Eblaite's verbal system follows the same structure as that of other Semitic languages, where the paradigmatic framework is organized based upon a double axis: the derivational axis, within which the verb's basic form goes through a certain number of modifications, and the inflectional axis, where the verb takes on an aspectual, personal, or modal value through a system of suffixation and prefixation.

Classification

Eblaite has been described as an East Semitic language or a North Semitic language; scholars notice the great affinity between Eblaite and pre-Sargonic Akkadian and debate the relation between the two.

North Semitic classification

- Edward Lipiński, noting that in the third millennium BC, there was no clear border between East Semitic languages and West Semitic languages, calls Eblaite a Paleo Syrian language and explains the similarities with Akkadian by the use of the same system of writing borrowed from Sumer.[22] Lipiński separates Eblaite from Akkadian, assigning the latter to the East Semitic languages while classifying Eblaite with Amorite and Ugaritic into a grouping he names the North Semitic languages.[23]

East Semitic classification

- Scholars such as Richard I. Caplice, Ignace Gelb and John Huehnergard, have the view that Eblaite is an East Semitic language not to be seen as an early Akkadian dialect,[24] because the differences with other Akkadian dialects are considerable.[25]
- Manfred Krebernik says that Eblaite "is so closely related to Akkadian that it may be classified as an early Akkadian dialect", although some of the names that appear in the tablets are Northwest Semitic.[26]

Eblaite is considered by the East-Semitic classification supporters as a language which exhibits both West-Semitic and East-Semitic features.[27][28] Grammatically, Eblaite is closer to Akkadian, but lexically and in some grammatical forms, Eblaite is closer to West-Semitic languages.[29]

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5. Gordon, "Amorite and Eblaite", page 101
6. "Our sources pertaining to the West Semites in Syria and Palestine flow almost uninterruptedly from the Old Babylonian period on. Two important conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the study of geographical names and of other, less important considerations : 1) The Semites entered Syria in mass in the Old Babylonian period, encountering a population of unknown, but certainly not Hurrian ethnic affiliation. 2) The Semites must have been established in Palestine long before the Old Babylonian period, and nothing prevents us from assuming that they may have been native to the area from time immemorial." In I. Gelb, 1961 b, p. 45
7. See Giovanni Pettinato, 1967-1968.
8. M. Liverani, 1965
9. P. Fronzaroli, 1977, p.40
10. G. Garbini 1981, p. 79
11. G. Pettinato 1975, pp. 361-374
12. G. Garbini 1974, pp. 65-68
13. R.B. I., 25. 1977, p. 238
14. I. Gelb, 1977, p. 7
15. I. Gelb, 1981, pp. 13-14
16. G. Pettinato, *Catalogo dei testi cuneiformi di Tell Mardikh* (MEE 1, 1979) no. 6424-30
17. P. Fronzaroli, 1978, p. 137. Translated from the French: "l'existence et l'autonomie des phonèmes /h/, /ḥ/ et /ḫ/ que confirme la réalisation de la voyelle /a/ en [ɛ] dans les syllabes fermées /ḥaC/ et / ʾaC/, de même que la tendance à étendre ce phénomène à la voyelle /a/ suivie d'une pharyngale. On manque actuellement d'éléments pour juger de l'existence d'un phonème /ġ/ ou d'une variante [ġ]"
18. Ibid, pp. 137-139. See also P. Fronzaroli, 1980, pp. 65-89 in *Studi Eblaiti* 1
19. I. Gelb, 1981, p. 24
20. Ibid. p. 65
21. M. Diakonoff prefers the terms "dative-locative" and "locative-adverbial," rather than the conventional "dative" and "locative," in order to better cover the semantic range of these cases. See Diakonoff, 1990, p. 25

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